

In 2014, the government of King Mswati III further restrained an already weakened media environment in Swaziland, and both journalists and media outlets were targeted by officials through the use of restrictive legislation. The government withholds advertising contracts from critical media outlets.

Legal Environment

Although the constitution protects freedom of expression and the press, the king has the power to suspend these protections at his discretion; these freedoms are already severely restricted in practice, especially when concerning political issues or the royal family. Numerous laws restrict media freedom, including harsh defamation laws; the Suppression of Terrorism Act of 2008, which the government has threatened to apply to critical journalists; and legislation that penalizes sedition with a prison sentence of up to 20 years. In December 2014, the Supreme Court ordered the privately owned daily *Times of Swaziland* to pay a fine of 550,000 lilangeni (\$49,000) to Senate president Gelane Simelane-Zwane, who launched a defamation case over a 2009 article that had questioned her family lineage and thus her claim to the chieftaincy of the KoNtshingila community. The fine was the highest ever issued in Swaziland for defamation, and media freedom advocates expressed concern that the financial burden could drive the newspaper into bankruptcy.

The king has absolute authority to appoint and remove judges, which significantly compromises judicial independence. In July 2014, the High Court sentenced human rights lawyer Thulani Maseko and editor in chief of the *Nation* magazine Bheki Makhubu to two years in jail for contempt of court. Their convictions were linked to the publication in early 2014 of separate articles in which Maseko and Makhubu each criticized Chief Justice Michael Ramodibedi, who subsequently initiated the contempt case. In April, Ramodibedi reportedly summoned Mbongeni Mbingo, managing editor of the *Swazi Observer* daily, for a meeting at which Ramodibedi demanded that the newspaper cease covering Maseko and Makhubu's case. In August, Ramodibedi's office issued a statement warning journalists against "adversely" commenting on ongoing court cases.

Swaziland does not have a freedom of information law, and accessing government information is difficult. The opening of the Swaziland Media Complaints Commission, a self-regulatory body of journalists and other media workers, was announced in 2013. However, the commission is underfunded and has low visibility, and some press freedom advocates have raised concerns about its independence. At the end of 2014, it remained unclear whether the body had resolved any complaints.

From the many media law reforms promised several years ago, there has only been progress on the establishment of the Swaziland Communication Commission, which was approved in 2013. The commission itself, whose mandate includes regulation of the broadcasting sector, appears to lack both the operational capacity and the legislative framework necessary to fulfill its duties.

Political Environment

Swazi media content is marked by a high degree of both official censorship and self-censorship on political and royal matters, often encouraged by hostile rhetoric and threats from officials. Concerns about sanctions or criminal prosecution have resulted in significant self-censorship among journalists at both

public and privately owned outlets. Journalists are reluctant to criticize advertisers for fear of losing contracts, and also experience pressure to provide favorable coverage of state-supported cultural events. The authorities have restricted media coverage of recent prodemocracy protests and public-sector strikes, among other controversial issues.

Journalists risk harassment and assault by both state and nonstate actors, although no major attacks against media workers were reported in 2014.

Economic Environment

The country's two daily newspapers—the *Times of Swaziland* and the *Swazi Observer*—are read almost exclusively in urban areas. The *Times* is privately owned, and *Observer* is effectively owned by the king through a royal investment company. Some analysts claim that the *Times* encounters more government scrutiny than does the *Observer*, and that the latter has more editorial freedom. The Swaziland Television Authority dominates the airwaves and generally favors the government in its coverage. The government treats state media as its mouthpiece. In August 2014, Information Minister Dumisani Ndlangamandla rejected calls from Parliament to transform the state-run Swaziland Broadcasting and Information Service and Swazi TV into public broadcasters, reportedly stating that the entities were primarily intended to serve state interests. State broadcasters are prohibited from reporting on the activities of labor unions, and private individuals cannot express opinions through state outlets without prior approval. Swazis with sufficient funds can freely purchase and use satellite dishes to receive signals from independent South African and international news media. Most Swazis, however, receive their news from the radio. There is one government-owned radio station and one independent station, Voice of the Church, which focuses on religious programming.

The government does not restrict internet-based media, though civil society and prodemocracy organizations have alleged that authorities monitor electronic communications and social-networking websites. Few Swazis can afford access to the internet. In 2014, 27 percent of people in Swaziland had access to the medium.

Advertisers, including the government, regularly exert financial pressure on media outlets to deter negative coverage, and their influence is significant in Swaziland's small economy. The government withholds advertising from critical outlets; for instance, it holds no direct contracts with the *Nation*, a monthly magazine that is often critical of Swazi authorities, and whose editor in chief received a two-year prison sentence in July 2014 for contempt of court. Further economic pressure can be exerted on outlets through frequent legal claims for damages. Journalists are poorly paid, and many have left the industry to work for the government or elsewhere in the private sector.